

Cell Phones in the Lifestyles of University Students in 2008

2008年の大学生のライフスタイルにおける携帯電話利用

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Abstract

Cell phone use among university students has grown exponentially over the past decade, mirroring the rapid development and popularization of cell phones in Japan over the same period. During this time, cell phones went from being a novelty among a few students in university classrooms to the point where today nearly all university students carry one. This study examines how university students use their cell phones and the extent to which the mobile technology has become a part of their lives. The research is based on a survey taken among Sakushin Gakuin University students in October 2008, and the following report is intended to represent a snapshot of the cell phone phenomenon among students at one university in Japan.

Introduction

University students lead lifestyles that are significantly different from those of their earlier school days in that they have greater control over their academic schedules and time, they often hold part-time jobs, and they are in an environment where they must develop new social skills and build friendships in order to make their university experience a productive one. Cell phones have added convenience to such lifestyles. Aside from their telephone and mail functions, the electronic devices are used for retrieving information, keeping records, accessing a variety of entertainment, and even making payments with electronic money. These features go hand in hand with the busy lifestyles of today's university students.

Cell phone ownership stands at nearly 100% among the university students in this study. It is a common sight to see students peering into opened cell phone handsets in classrooms, hallways, and around campus. Despite the ubiquity of cell phones, students are generally conscientious about cell phone discipline, since rules

for behavior concerning their possession are explicitly stated in the university's guidelines or on makeshift signs posted on classroom doors. Off-campus public spaces are also replete with notices that remind people to silence their cell phone signals so they do not disturb others with intrusive telephone conversations. Yet in the classroom, there are subtle signs that cell phones have not been completely turned off: even though ring tones have been silenced, cell phone vibrations can occasionally be heard during lessons, and there are always a few students who can be seen glancing down surreptitiously at a small, out-of-view object with requisite concentration—which almost always turns out to be a cell phone when the instructor checks to see what the object is. Furthermore, some imaginative behavior concerning cell phones has been witnessed in the classroom, such as students plugging cell phones into nearby electrical outlets to recharge them, students photographing notes on the blackboard rather than writing them in notebooks, and a student reading an e-mailed question to an essay problem on an exam that a friend who had taken the exam earlier had sent him.

This study came about as the result of this instructor's deep curiosity regarding the cell phone trend that quickly swept over the university's students. To gather data and assess the relationship students have with cell phones, a survey was conducted on October 20 and 22, 2008 among the 1st and 2nd-year students in this instructor's English Communication classes, which are part of the curriculum of the Human and Cultures Sciences Department. Students were asked to consider all the classes they were currently taking—not just the present one—when responding to the questions. The questions were written in English and Japanese, and students were free to respond to written questions in Japanese or English, the majority choosing Japanese. Percentages for the most part have been rounded up or down.

1. The Participants

Ninety-nine students participated in this survey with a composition as follows: 1st-year students: 59% (58 students) ; 2nd-year students: 36% (36 students) ; 3rd-year students: 5% (5 students) ; no 4th-year students. Female students outnumbered male students by slightly more than 2 to 1 (68 to 31, respectively) . Among the students, 98 had a cell phone and 1 did not have a cell phone, resulting in a cell phone ownership rate of 99%.

At 99%, the cell phone ownership rate among university students is extremely high. While certain factors may be called into question, such as the fact that the students surveyed were from only one department, or the fact that close to 70% of the participants were female and may suggest a different pattern of ownership compared to males, the figure is nearly the same as a larger survey conducted among public high school and middle school students in July 2007, which shows that the cell phone ownership rate among high school students is also extremely high at 97.8% (Fujimoto and Yamao 2008) . Assuming that university students are likely to use a cell phone to support a lifestyle that is more independent and busier in many ways than that of their high school days, the higher ownership rate among university students is a logical increase.

2. Length of Time Owning a Cell Phone

The large majority of students surveyed had owned a cell phone starting from an early age. Most students received their first cell phone between the ages of 12–18 (89%) , which translates to a period of ownership between 1–7 years. Within the group of 98 students, nearly one-half first had a cell phone in middle school (47%) , and two-fifths were in high school when they first had a cell phone (42%) . A small number had owned a cell phone since elementary school (8%) , while the smallest number got their first cell phone upon entering the university (3%) . Overall, these numbers suggest that university students have a high degree of familiarity with cell phones and the technology associated with them, and many have seen cell phones evolve over this time span, which contributes to their high comfort level with mobile technology and a second nature awareness of the behaviors connected with them.

3. Reasons Why Owning a Cell Phone Is Important

Students were asked to select the features they felt were important in owning a cell phone and could choose as many answers as applied to their situation.

Students feel their cell phone is important because they can:

Contact family and friends easily:	96% (94 students)
Check the time, schedules, weather, etc.:	69% (68 students)
Use it in case of emergencies:	67% (66 students)
Exchange information with friends and classmates:	67% (66 students)
Take photographs if a camera is not available:	60% (59 students)
Be in contact with a part-time employer if necessary:	51% (50 students)
Form friendships and join school networks:	26% (25 students)
Make reservations for tickets, etc.:	13% (13 students)
Access the university's homepage:	3% (3 students)

(Total: 98 students)

By far, most students rated their cell phones as an important device for contacting family and friends (96%) . Another important reason for having a cell phone was to be able to contact a part-time employer if necessary or to be able to be contacted by a part-time employer (51%) . This number represents only half of the respondents, but it is highly likely that the percentage would be closer to 100% if there were a separate category for students that hold a part-time job. Having a cell phone in case of an urgent situation, exchanging information with friends and classmates, and checking factual information such as schedules, the time, and weather forecasts were also considered important by two-thirds or more of the respondents. The category students rated least important for their cell phone use was accessing the university's home page (3%) .

4. Cell Phones Are Used Primarily for Mail

Students were asked which function they use on their cell phone most: Telephone, Mail, or Other. (Mail is defined as e-mail or text mail.)

Students use their cell phones most often for:

Mail	Other	Phone
54%	27%	19%
(53 students)	(26 students)	(19 students)

(Total: 98 students)

Students were then asked to rank the three functions they use on their cell phone according to frequency of use.

Use/rank	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Primary use:	Mail	Mail	Other	Phone	Other	Phone
Secondary use:	Phone	Other	Mail	Mail	Phone	Other
Tertiary use:	Other	Phone	Phone	Other	Mail	Mail

Percentage:	35%	22%	22%	13%	5%	3%
No. of students:	(32)	(20)	(20)	(12)	(5)	(3)

(92 students) In this section, a total of 92 students marked all three categories.

By a wide margin, Mail was the primary function used by students (54%) . This was followed by Other (27%) , while Phone was the function least often used (19%) . Other was specified as Internet access, i-mode (a mobile Internet provider) , camera, games, blogs, checking a friend's homepage, personal calendar, electronic money, and reading novels, with the majority being Internet access.

Mobile connectivity in which users can maintain social contact with people from a remote location or connect to the Internet appears to be the most attractive feature of cell phones among university students. This stands in contrast to mobile voice communication, which may be the most attractive feature for companies, for example. The three functions listed above (Mail, Other, and Phone) differ in their social aspects of connectivity. Phone represents immediate, one-time use segments of communication that are not necessarily tied to social connections, and Other allows one-way interaction with online sites and also includes features that are independent of connectivity such as camera, games, calendar, electronic money, and novels. By

comparison, Mail helps support social connections due to its inherent mechanisms: mail generally involves more time and thought to construct, it can be used with non-verbal emotional markers known as “emoticons” to enhance a message, it usually demands a response, and mail records are stored on cell phones. It is reasonable to conclude that university students are most interested in the functions that allow them to be connected to people, as shown by their wide preference for Mail, followed by their preference for Other, which includes online sites and options for off-line features.

5. Commonly Used Cell Phone Applications

Students were asked which applications they use, checking all that apply.

Phone:	98%	(96 students)
Mail:	96%	(94 students)
Camera for photographs and video:	70%	(69 students)
Music downloads:	68%	(67 students)
Reading a blog:	62%	(61 students)
Reading news on the Internet:	58%	(57 students)
Playing games:	50%	(49 students)
Writing a blog:	35%	(34 students)
Participating in a social network such as mixi, etc:	35%	(34 students)
Watching animation or video:	21%	(21 students)
Recording audio:	11%	(11 students)
Participating in fan clubs (idol, sports, etc.) :	9%	(9 students)
Other:	6%	(6 students)
Electronic money (for transportation, shopping) :	5%	(5 students)

(98 students) For Other, students specified writing memos, checking train schedules and maps, English and Japanese dictionaries, accessing free or for-pay sites, ticket purchases, and participation in auctions.

Cell phones today are loaded with applications and features. The applications and features that students checked do not necessarily reflect overall volumes of

usage, but whether or not a student uses them (for example, a high percentage of students use mail at a rate nearly 3 times more than phone, but more students overall use the phone function—even if rarely—than the mail function) . The numbers reveal that cell phones, in addition to being a telephone and mail provider, serve as a wellspring for various forms of information and entertainment. The content is presented across an extremely wide range of data: voice and audio, visual images, and broadcast or streamed video and animation. Students use cell phones for news and entertainment and participate in interactive sites such as blogs or social networks like mixi (Japan's most popular social networking site) . Other forms of recreation include camera and video, games, music, novels, auctions, and fan clubs, which typically send subscribers periodic updates about their favorite idol. The cell phone has become a personalized, portable multimedia information and entertainment center of sorts, and because of the numerous applications and features, students face the risk of becoming preoccupied with the device for inordinate amounts of time.

6. Bringing Cell Phones to School

Ninety-five percent of the students reported “always” bringing their cell phones to school, while only 5 percent reported “almost always” bringing their cell phones to school. There are no restrictions concerning students bringing cell phones to the university; however, restrictions on use are in effect: the university guidelines brochure, *Campus Life 2008*, stipulates that “cell phones must be turned off during class” (「携帯電話について授業中は電源を切り…」 p. 51) . But as sections 8, 9, and 10 show, students widely overlook the rule.

7. Places Where Students Store Their Cell Phones During Class

Students store cell phones:

In their bag or backpack:	61%	(60 students)
On their person (pocket, etc.) :	28%	(27 students)
On the desk:	8%	(8 students)
Inside the desk:	3%	(3 students)

(98 students)

Most students keep their cell phones where they do not interfere with a classroom lesson and they are usually stored out of the instructor's line of vision when the instructor is teaching. However, this instructor has noticed that cell phones are not always neatly stored away; they are often placed on top of bags and backpacks (not "in" as stated in the question above) .

8. Keeping Cell Phones On or Off During Class

Despite the university rule that prohibits cell phones from being turned on during class, most students (93%) leave the power on but silence the sound of incoming phone or mail signals. A very small percentage of students fully comply with the rule by turning off the power to their cell phones (7%) . Therefore vibrations that signal an incoming call can sometimes be heard during class. On the very rare occasions that a student has taken a phone call during a lesson, the student has stepped out of the classroom to take what is presumably an urgent call.

9. Ratio of Students Who Check Their Cell Phones During Class

Since most students leave the power to their cell phones on during class, many end up checking their cell phones at least once during the 90-minute class: of the 91 students who responded to this question, 61% reported checking their cell

phones, while 39% reported they do not check. Many do so “out of habit” or “only if there is a call or mail signal.” However, students rarely open and read an incoming mail during class if there is one.

10. Students’ Reasons for Using a Cell Phone During Class

A little under half of the students reported using their cell phones while class is in session, while a little over half reported they do not (44% and 56%, respectively) . The 43 students who responded affirmatively gave the following reasons for using their cell phones in class, checking all that applied.

To read mail if it is urgent:	86%	(37 students)
To use the dictionary (English and Japanese) :	60%	(26 students)
To access a website for information:	33%	(14 students)
To refer to a memo related to the lesson:	9%	(4 students)
To photograph notes on the blackboard:	7%	(3 students)
To show someone a picture or data:	7%	(3 students)

(43 students)

Students occasionally use cell phones during class in spite of the rules, and the use seems to be driven by a desire to use the technology rather than being a sign of defiance or boredom, although such cases have also been known to happen. New technology always finds eager users regardless of whether the new use is an improvement over older methods. In the case of reading urgent mail, which most students in this group said they would do in class, the degree of urgency may be called into question since such situations might warrant a more immediate means of communication, such as a phone call. Accessing websites on a cell phone for a dictionary or other resources may be useful, but it tends to be very cumbersome compared to an electronic or paper dictionary or a computer with high-speed access because text input and transmission times are considerably slower. Novel uses of cell phones in class have also appeared: in one instance, a student had shown this instructor a photograph of a park with a reservoir that the student wanted to write about for an English essay and felt that a description of the place could be

communicated more quickly with a photograph than words when first proposing the idea. In another instance, a student who regularly sat at the front of the room was noticed photographing the notes on the blackboard rather than writing them in a notebook.

11. Checking Cell Phones in the Classroom During Non-class Time

A very high percentage of students check their cell phones in the classroom before, after, or before and after a class starts (90%) , while only a very few do not (10%) . In such a setting, students are not necessarily online; for example they can be seen showing one another photographs or checking calendars. The frequent activity of having a cell phone in hand while talking with classmates—or if the student is not interacting with classmates, is seated by himself/herself while checking a cell phone—creates an environment in which it is considered normal to have a cell phone. Furthermore, such a setting reinforces the notion that cell phones are social tools for university students. Fujimoto and Yamao point out that high schools typically enforce strict rules that ban cell phone use in the classroom (2007) , which may also contribute to the high frequency of use in a university classroom: once high school students become university students, they relish the new freedom of using cell phones in such a space.

12. Frequency of Cell Phone Use While at School

Students who use their cell phones between 5–9 times a day while at school make up the largest segment among those surveyed (35%) . This is followed by nearly equal percentages of students who use their cell phones at school 2–4 times a day (29.5%) and 10 times or more a day at school (28.5%) . Only a few students use their cell phones at school once a day (5%) , and those who use their cell phone less than once a day are very rare (2%) . In total, a great majority of the students use their cell phones at school at a minimum of twice a day to over ten times a day (93%) . The frequency of cell phone use while at school is very high considering that these numbers do not include students' usage during their private time when not in school. One factor that may contribute to the high frequency of

use on campus is that there are situations that lend themselves to opportunities for communication by cell phone, such as making plans to meet for lunch at one of the university's two dining halls, or deciding which of the university's numerous bus rides to take to or from the city's train station.

13. Reasons for Checking or Using Cell Phones Even if There Is No Incoming Signal

It has become second nature for a very high proportion of students to check their cell phones regardless of whether there is an incoming signal. Nearly all students do so (95%) , while 5% do not. Students gave the following reasons for checking their cell phones even if there is no signal:

To alleviate boredom:	43%	(40 students)
To check information:	30%	(28 students)
To reread or review something:	22%	(20 students)
Other:	5%	(5 students)

(93 students)

In this question, students cited Other as updating a blog, checking a hobby site, no special reason, checking the time, out of habit, and to see if the user had been contacted by anyone. Surprisingly, more than two-fifths of the students responded that they check their cell phones because they are bored. Approximately half of the students cited certain objectives for checking their cell phones even when there was no signal, for example they wanted to investigate something or there was something they wanted to reread or review.

14. Students' Reactions if They Forget to Bring Their Cell Phone to School

More than half of the students reported having the experience of forgetting to bring their cell phone to school (58%) , while approximately two-fifths had never forgotten to bring their cell phone to school (42%) . Among the 57 students who

had forgotten to bring their cell phone, most felt somewhat inconvenienced without it (38.5%) , while 31.5% felt highly inconvenienced—they were “well aware” they were without their cell phone. Slightly less than one-third of the students did not feel bothered when they forgot to bring their cell phone to school (30%) .

Students who feel highly inconvenienced without a cell phone may feel anxious about not being able to contact a person who might be dependent on them, whether family, friend, or employer, just as much as being in a position where they cannot be contacted by such persons. Students who feel only somewhat bothered might also miss the convenience of their cell phones as well as being in a position where they cannot contact or be contacted by other people. These two groups represent the large majority of the students (70%) . In such a situation, not having access to the most basic functions of a cell phone—phone and mail—leaves the student with a degree of uncertainty. Even though the phone function is not as frequently used as the other functions, and even though a cell phone’s other functions, applications, and features are extremely popular, the use of phone and mail are what most university students consider most important, as suggested by the statistics in sections 3 and 5 (being able to contact people easily was the function considered most important by most of the students at 96%; and 98% use the phone function on their cell phones) .

Conclusion

University classrooms foster an environment in which cell phones have become the must-have accessory among university students. Busier and more independent lifestyles contribute to a need for cell phones and numerous cell phone applications and features are attractive to students.

Most university students use their cell phones for mail and online recreation, indicating a strong interest in being connected to people and the Internet. Off-line applications such as camera, games, and personal memo are also widely used. The cell phone applications that interest students and those which they use most frequently are different from what they consider to be the most important. University students are more interested in the social features of a cell phone whether it be mail, a social networking site, blogs, or manually showing photographs to friends in the classroom, although they regard being able to contact family and friends easily

as the cell phone's most important function.

The frequent rate at which students check their cell phones and the high percentage of students who check their cell phones because they are bored might be an indication that cell phones easily distract students from more hands-on learning experiences in a three-dimensional setting. Possible solutions to this problem would be to increase awareness of the potential risks that overuse of cell phones might have on university students' well being and to promote conscientious behavior in both 3D and virtual social settings. At the same time, questions arise as to whether cell phones can be used to play a more integrated role in the educational lifestyles of students since students are so familiar with the technology. For example, would it be feasible to employ cell phone technology to learning English as a foreign language (EFL) ? For now, university students may just be enjoying a newfound freedom by using their cell phones in a more liberal way compared to their high school days, and the novelty may wear off once they become accustomed to the things that cell phones can do and they move on to other technologies.

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